

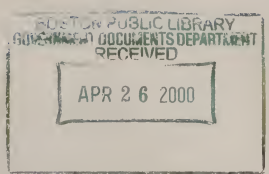
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Back Bay/Beacon Hill

Open Space Plan 2000

Renewing the Legacy ... Fulfilling the Vision

City of Boston
Parks & Recreation Department



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Back Bay – Beacon Hill

The Setting

History

Geology, Soils, and Topography

Like Central Boston, humans have extensively modified the Back Bay and Beacon Hill. The Back Bay, of course, gets its name from its original existence as a broad, shallow tidal marsh within the Charles River estuary. Today, the entirety of the neighborhood sits upon 15 to 30 feet of artificial fill, deposited over three centuries. Much of the fill material came from the original Beacon Hill. The present day Massachusetts Statehouse sits atop Beacon Hill at an elevation of approximately 93 feet. Prior to human intervention, however, Beacon Hill actually consisted of three peaks, all in excess of 100 feet, with the highest over 140 feet. This led the earliest settlers to call the area Trimount, later modified to Tremont. Although widely described as a drumlin, the original Beacon Hill did not have the correct shape nor was comprised of the correct material, glacial till, to be so classified. The hill is more actually described as a remnant end moraine with significant layers of stratified sand and gravel which was most likely derived prior to, and subsequently modified by, the most recent glacial event.

Water Resources, Vegetation, and Fisheries and Wildlife

The Charles River Basin provides water-related recreational opportunities and aquatic habitat. Fish ladders at the Charles River Dam allow some anadromous species to reach freshwater breeding areas, most notably Atlantic herring. The Basin is also an important feeding and resting area for wintering waterfowl.

Beacon Hill takes its name from the sentry light erected on its peak to warn settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in case of a threat from Indians or foreign invaders. The south slope as it exists today began to emerge in the 1790s with the building of the present State House. Starting at this time, the hill was reshaped and the old beacon taken down.

Cutting and filling allowed the development of Louisburg Square and Mt. Vernon Street for substantial house lots. The north slope had three sections by the latter 1700s: stately houses around Bowdoin Square, an African-American community between Joy and Philips streets and a “redlight” district near the Charles River. The north slope changed due largely to construction of the Massachusetts General Hospital complex and of tenement and apartment buildings in the 1800s.

The Back Bay originally referred to a tidal body of water on

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the western edge of the Shawmut Peninsula which stretched from Brookline to the Common. A dam, finished in 1821 to harness industrial water power, ran along what is now Beacon Street, from Charles Street to present-day Kenmore Square. Stagnant water and sewerage soon led to demands to fill the area. Landfill began at the Public Garden and extended west. From the 1850s to the 1890s, the entire area was filled beyond Kenmore Square and north to the present location of Storrow Drive.

Parisian boulevards were the inspiration for the linear plan of the Back Bay with its stately tree-lined spine of Commonwealth Avenue. By contrast, an English model with squares influenced the layout of Beacon Hill and the South End. The Back Bay developed quickly with fashionable townhouses reflecting the affluence of its residences. Deed restrictions created consistency for building heights, setbacks and masonry construction.

In the realm of more recent history, development of the Massachusetts turnpike, the Prudential Center and Copley Place have created a relatively new major commercial and hotel complex. Also, in the past decade, retail activity has been upgraded substantially on Newbury Street. Both Beacon Hill and Back Bay are now under historic district designations which provide

continuing design controls. The Common, Public Garden and Commonwealth Avenue Mall are designated City of Boston Landmarks. In addition, the Common and Garden are National Historic Landmarks (the highest tier of listing in the National Historic Register of Historic Places.)

DEMOGRAPHICS/HOUSING

The average household size is relatively small, 1.6 persons. Group quarters accommodate 12% of the area's population due to a number of college students and some lodging house tenants. This figure, however, has diminished from 17% in 1990 due to the recent surge in property values. The median age of 35.8 is higher than the city-wide median of 32.7 years.

The relative affluence of the Back Bay and Beacon Hill neighborhoods is reflected in an average annual household income of \$109,047, compared to \$56,110 for the city at large. Another indice more indirectly supports the area's affluence: 75% of Back Bay and Beacon Hill residents have a college degree, while only 30% of city residents as a whole have achieved this educational status. A final indicator of the area's relative affluence is that 76% of the housing stock in the Back Bay and on Beacon Hill is valued at more than \$500,000. For the city as a whole, this figure is 2%.

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Whites make up 86% of the population, compared to 57% city-wide. African-Americans account for 5%, Latinos for 3% and Asians 7%.

Masonry townhouses of 4-6 stories are the predominant type of housing in the area, dating mainly from the 19th century. Many buildings are now divided into 5 or more units. There are some later and larger apartment buildings. Back Bay and Beacon Hill have the highest property values in the city, the highest rents and only 4% assisted housing units. As of 1998, 40% of the housing units were owner-occupied, compared to 38% across the city.

THE OPEN SPACE SYSTEM TODAY

EQUITY AND INVESTMENT

The area's residents have an average of 5.01 acres of open space per 1,000 persons, close to the city-wide average of 5.5 acres. The total amount of open space in the area is 146 acres. Stated another way, Back Bay/Beacon Hill has 5.1% of Boston's total population and 4.6% of its total open space. Due to high real estate values, the overall amount of open space is unlikely to increase unless private land owners can provide park space in their development plans, notably Prudential Center.

In the past five years, the City of Boston and others have invested over \$9 million for capital improvements in the area's parks (see table). This includes the \$5,086,000 joint public/private effort to transform Copley Square.

ASSESSMENT

Because they are large, centrally located in or near dense residential and business districts, historic in character and highly visible, the parks in this area are among the most heavily used in the greater metropolitan area: Boston Common, the Public Garden, Commonwealth Avenue Mall and Copley Square, all under city jurisdiction, the MDC's Charles River Esplanade and the State House Park.

While these parks are regional and tourist destinations, they also serve the neighborhood. Active sports facilities and play areas are contained within Boston Common and the Charles River Esplanade. In addition to the major parks, the Beacon Hill area has two small playgrounds and the Back Bay has one. Despite heavy use, the parks in this area are generally in very good condition.

A pressing concern is the availability of extraordinary resources to maintain such heavily used parks. Another immediate need is better care for aging and

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heavily stressed street and park trees, accompanied by needs for more replanting and for adequate care of new trees. Although there is a need for more ball fields, play area and tennis courts, such needs are unlikely to be met in the near term given land use pressures and high property values.

See also the chapters on the Emerald Necklace, Historic Burying Grounds and Trees for further in-depth discussion of issues important to parks in the Back Bay/Beacon Hill neighborhood.

THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

This neighborhood's already popular parks will likely see increasing use in the next few years, especially with the city's current focus on tourism. For many parks in the area, the need is for extraordinary maintenance and management efforts to safeguard already completed or currently pending capital improvements. Boston Common is the exception, where major capital projects are planned. This neighborhood offers an excellent opportunity for the city to create a model tree program.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Focus on Boston Common for new capital projects. Upgrade water, drainage, and path systems. Pursue high priority rehabilitation

projects including the Tremont Street. Opportunities shall be pursued to implement other Management Plan recommendations when the Common is disturbed for projects initiated by others. Such projects include the subway station renovation and the reconstruction of the underground garage.

- Finish planned and pending capital programs for the Central Burying Grounds, Phillips Street Playground, Commonwealth Avenue Mall, and the Public Garden.
- Continue to coordinate review and approval of projects for historic parks with all other city agencies that may have jurisdiction: Beacon Hill Architectural District Commission, Back Bay Historic District Commission, Boston Landmarks Commission, and Boston Art Commission.
- Model a tree initiative, which can capitalize planting and cyclical care. The program must institutionalize Parks Department standards for

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planting of trees by various city agencies. Focus street tree planting on Beacon Hill, Newbury Street, and Boylston Street. Focus park tree activities on Boston Common, the Public Garden, and Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Seek out the multitude of Sources for outside support. Institute a tree giving policy with a built-in agreement for two years of follow-up care.

- Continue to enhance the Boston Parks Department's maintenance resources, especially for turf management, routine maintenance of park elements, and graffiti removal.
- Support MDC efforts to maintain the Charles River Esplanade.
- Train and employ the Boston Youth Clean-Up Corps to perform specific park maintenance projects in city and MDC parks.
- Manage for the reduction of competing uses and over-use. Follow the master plans and other established Parks Department policies regarding use of specific

areas and facilities. Explore cooperative efforts to create additional active play and sports facilities, recognizing that the expansion of ball fields, children's play areas, and courts is not feasible in existing parks.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

- Provide ongoing and increased security. Expand the Boston Park Rangers presence, especially year-round; continue to explore enforcement powers. Continue to support Boston Police Department efforts. Install lights according to the master plans and complete the statue lighting for Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Install call boxes or phone s as per the master plans.
- Explore design options for maximum use of existing active recreation facilities, without disturbing the peace or historic integrity of the parks or their surrounds.
- Strengthen established community/city communications. Continue review of

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- proposed capital projects through park partner and friends groups, neighborhood groups, open space organizations, and park user groups.
- Provide better coordination regarding street tree planting and management. Accelerate replacement of trees. Establish a tree endowment fund and expanded volunteer corps. Establish a city-wide educational program regarding trees.
 - Complete the fencing, signage, and statue lighting programs for Commonwealth Avenue Mall. Continue to improve security. Water trees as needed. Volunteers and Parks personnel should provide direction to Boston Youth Clean-up Corps crew.
 - Request the parks Department to mow the grass at Clarendon Street Playground.
 - Support implementation of improvements in the Boston Public Works Department plan for Boylston Street. Plant existing planters by the Hynes Convention Center and the Fire Station.
 - Continue to maintain the horticultural health of Copley Square and safeguard the capital investments there by public/private efforts. Enforce Parks Department rules and regulations for No Skateboarding and No Swimming or Wading.
 - Improve the Boston Common Little League field to be consistent with the softball field regarding turf, bleachers, and lighting. Mobilize volunteers to work with maintenance crew. Facilitate more youth league play with measures such as access to the softball field for Saturday mornings and exhibition games. Resolve conflict with soccer players at the softball field. Turn off softball field lights when games end.
 - Explore the possibility of Pony League play on the existing ball field at the MDC Charles River Esplanade.

